



# The syndrome of "overcoming modernity": learning from Japan about ultra-nationalism

Alain-Marc Rieu

## ► To cite this version:

Alain-Marc Rieu. The syndrome of "overcoming modernity": learning from Japan about ultra-nationalism. *Transtext(e)s Transcultures: Journal of Global Cultural Studies*, 2015, Géopolitique de la connaissance et transferts culturels, 9, 10.4000/transtexts.552 . halshs-01390067

**HAL Id: halshs-01390067**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01390067>**

Submitted on 31 Oct 2016

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Alain-Marc Rieu

Professor, Department of philosophy, University of Lyon - Jean Moulin

Senior research fellow, IETT, University Jean Moulin & Associate fellow, IAO, ENS Lyon

26 August 2015

## **The syndrome of “overcoming modernity”**

### **Learning from Japan about ultra-nationalism**

“Japanese modernity is disorder itself”  
Moroi Saburo (cited in Calichman 2008: 171)

#### **Abstract**

The objective is to analyse the cultural, social and political conditions of a decisive period of Japan's modernity known by the slogan of “overcoming modernity” (*kindai no chokoku*). This slogan is the title of a colloquium, which took place in Tokyo in July 1942, eight months after Pearl Harbour, and associated influential and respected intellectuals. This colloquium and slogan signalled a deep and pervasive cultural, political and societal syndrome, conducive in the case of Japan to fascism and ultra-nationalism. But this syndrome is not an experience unique to Japan. It is observed in every modern society, as a step in its past but also present evolution. This syndrome signals therefore an ambiguous and highly dangerous period. It expresses the collective experience of a society at a given moment. This experience conditions its relation to the past, its understanding of the present and also the capacity of individuals and groups to respond to their present situation. This collective experience is expressed in metaphysics and inter-subjective bond reinforcing a community under intense pressure. In Japan, “overcoming modernity” expressed a deep disenchantment with modernization's effects and sequels, along with deep individual anxiety and collective confusion. The case of Japan provides us with unique knowledge of a major societal syndrome. The goal is to construct a theory capable of identifying today similar periods of

deep political and cultural instability in nations like China, France, Russia and others, with the goal to analyse these cases and evaluate the resulting risks and potential responses.

### **Keywords**

Japan, collective memory, history, identity, fascism, ultra-nationalism, religion, politics, intellectuals, philosophy

### **Ultra-nationalism: a complex cultural and social construction**

The objective is to add a wider perspective to a critical and well-studied moment of Japanese modernity, known by the slogan of “overcoming modernity” (*kindai no chokoku*). This slogan was formulated in the early 1940s. It signalled a deep and pervasive cultural, political and societal syndrome, which shaped and intensified Japanese ultra-nationalism, which brought legitimacy to a totalitarian regime and justified a total war, which could not be won. It is a typical case of self-fulfilling prophecy: the Japanese had to unify under their Emperor in order to remain a free nation and Japan was in the end defeated and colonized. Paradoxically this defeat is supposed to have freed the Japanese people from this historical period, and its metaphysics and politics<sup>2</sup>.

This slogan points to a specific historical moment: extreme political and economic constraints had given birth to an overwhelming cultural issue: to overcome modernity, this modern world, which has invaded and overwhelmed the Japanese nation since its *opening* in the last seven years, since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The problem was not to restore a vanishing traditional society. But where is this new overcoming leading Japan? Is this cultural movement a criticism of Meiji modernizers, of their conception of modernity? The moment, the syndrome and its slogan are not unique to Japan. On the contrary, they are found in every modern society and they seem to constitute a step in its own evolution. This syndrome expresses the collective memory of a society at a given moment. It conditions the relationship of this society to its past, the understanding of the present and the capacity of individuals and groups to be actors responding to their present situation. But this collective memory is both a subjective experience and inter-subjective bond reinforcing a community under extreme stress. In Japan, “overcoming modernity” expressed a deep disenchantment with modernization’s effects and sequels, deep individual anxiety, collective confusion and even despair. *Expressionism* was the name given in Germany to a similar ambiguous

---

<sup>2</sup> Thank you to Glenn Hook for having reread a former version.

experience, which took shape in the early 1910s, was reinforced in the 1920s and was absorbed in the 1930s by the Nazi party, Nazi ideology and its policies<sup>3</sup>. Japanese intellectuals learned in Germany how to articulate in literature and poetry, philosophy and cinema, the experience, which in their own context was transforming their collective memory. In the 1930s and early 1940s, a French type of fascism was also a version of the “overcoming modernity” syndrome and, like in Japan, this virus did not vanish (Sternhell 2012).

It is short sighted to reject the project of “overcoming modernity” in the past: indeed, it remains as a project faced today in different parts of the world. The slogan expresses a psychosocial experience reflecting a specific historical conjuncture. It seems to emerge when the cycle of modernization in a society is reaching its end; when its projection in the future and its promises are contradicted by daily life; when people open their eyes and minds to the reality of modernization; when they realize what a *modernized* society really is, what it brought about and, having lost all hope, what they must live with heretofore. Furthermore, “overcoming modernity” expresses how individuals and groups experience a systemic crisis. It reveals how a systemic crisis is concretely transforming their collective life and individual subjectivities as well as how they try to react and respond to such a crisis. It is precisely the moment when societies become fragile, unstable and their evolution unpredictable.

In this way, “overcoming modernity” represents also a typical syndrome of contemporary societies, not only in Europe, in contemporary France and Japan but elsewhere, too, in China and Russia. The experience of “overcoming modernity” was historically the source of extreme right-wing ideologies. But extreme cases dissimulate the pervasiveness of a complex psychosocial process. In these periods, opposite ideologies converge into a *meta-ideology*, which permeates individuals and groups in society beyond contradictory or opposite beliefs and ideologies. That is, “overcoming modernity” goes beyond the modern opposition between Left and Right. It is manifest as a sort of metaphysic, or mythology, all at once cultural, social, political and economic<sup>4</sup>. This meta-ideology is considered to explain everything. It is not falsified by events and is constantly adapted to respond to challenges or oppositions, to criticism from knowledge established by human and social sciences. It articulates from inside personal and collective memory (Halbwachs 1952 & 1992, Le Goff 1988). It functions as modern society’s mythology. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan

---

<sup>3</sup> For the psychosocial context of emergence of the Nazi ideology and related policies, see (for instance) Otto Friedrich 1972: chapters XIII to XVII, and Wilhelm Reich 1933.

<sup>4</sup> The formation of a meta-ideology is rare but not uncommon. Another case of meta-ideology is the neoliberal paradigm, which emerged in the second half of the 1970s and remains dominant today.

called this modern mythology the “Imaginary” in order to explain what people is situation of stress consider “real”, their reality, the common world as given, lived and explained to them.

Finally the syndrome of “overcoming modernity” combines memory with history. Memory refers to an individual and collective subjectivity: it is made of narratives, discourses, private and shared experiences in the back of everybody’s mind, reactivated and reinterpreted in the course of daily life. Because it is both private and collective, memory is never homogeneous or unified but always fluid, ambiguous and multiple. Memory is inter-subjective showing patterns source of various philosophical elaborations developing a phenomenology of an experience common to individuals and groups during a certain period of time. One of these elaborations is the construction of narratives expressing a common history making sense and organizing collective memories into a common memory. We all are immersed in a collective memory with its narratives and anecdotes making our common history. This is what we have in common, how we communicate: it constitutes the “social networks”, which are the fabric of our everyday life and trans-individual identity.

But in the evolution of societies, *history* took also another sense and dimension. If the first sense, history means an immersive subjectivity, this new sense supposes a discontinuity and even creates a *distance* from collective memory and subjectivity. This new cognitive attitude emerges in the course of the so-called “modernization” process as result of disruptive events or catastrophes. This new attitude does not annihilate collective subjectivity, memory and history. But it brings in a different perspective; it operates a growing *distantiation*, it opens a different relation to society, like the beginning or possibility of a new epoch. This different conception of history brings into the open and criticizes the presuppositions of existing historical narratives, illusions of collective subjectivities and related ideologies, including their political consequences. The transformation of collective memory into this new history is a social and political construction typical of modern societies, i.e. societies characterized by the formation of human and social sciences. These disciplines constantly introduce within these societies a critical distance, which are transforming them, making them change and progress. This evolution makes possible a completely different conception and practice of philosophy. Shifting from collective memory to history as human science remains a constant tension and unfinished struggle.

## 1. Japan's modernization and its discontents

In Japan, this “overcoming modernity” process started in the 1930s and it receded by the late 1940s when the “second modernization” opened by the reconstruction of the wartime devastation was superseding this experience. But this experience remained a repressed memory, one that was reactivated in the late 1980s when Japan's economy, society and culture glided into another systemic crisis, which lasts until today. The experience has been extremely well studied by Japanese researchers (Takeuchi see Calichman 2005, Kato 2010, Tsurumi 2013, See Olson (1992) for an overview) and by specialists of Japan (Doak 1994, 2007; Harootunian 2000; Calichman 2004, 2008; Harootunian & Miyoshi 1989), who have been studying in the early 1990s the similarities between post-modernism and the idea of overcoming modernity. Their work provides us with a deep understanding of this key moment in Japanese history and by extension of similar social, political and cultural movements identified in European history as fascism. Even if Japan's ultra-nationalism of the late 1930s and 1940s was an extreme form of fascism, greatly influenced by German philosophy, these studies of Japan have built up our knowledge of this historical moment as far richer than the notions of nationalism, fascism and Nazism. Indeed, the work as a whole helps to identify and explain similar historical moments in different societies, in the past, present and even the future<sup>7</sup>. In each modernising society, a collective experience of “overcoming modernity” seems to take shape as an overwhelming social, cultural and political issue. Harry Harootunian (2000) explained that in the case of Japan it is both a collective experience of being overcome by modernity and the urge to overcome modernity as a response to this collective anxiety.

It is the subjective experience of an estranged society shared by a whole community, of past or recent evolutions, which have disrupted or distorted an established order or continuous path. This experience is a sense of loss felt intimately by individual subjects, with intense anxiety about the present and future of their community. In these moments, society has lost the *imagined* ground, the frame of its history, and the grand narratives at the core of its identity. Individual subjectivities feel they lost what binds them into a community within a social system. For memory is always private as well as collective: it touches the relationship of an individual to itself, its sense of identity, as well as its relationship with the others built in

---

<sup>7</sup> For instance, in China, the present cultural debate about the opposition between “true” Chinese culture and western influences is typically a case of the syndrome of “overcoming modernity”. This cultural debate expresses and dissimulates at the same time a major political struggle with major consequences.

her or his identity<sup>8</sup>. The imagined collective memory holding a community together is fractured and this fracture needs to be repressed. Having lost the frame and the map holding the puzzle together, its fragments gravitate in search of other *attractors*.

This psychosocial instability is expressed in the Japanese experience of *tenkō* (turn around, reversal, swift shift). A recurrent feature in Japanese history, *tenkō* is often understood as a negative cultural feature (deceit, lack of trust, etc.) or as personal weakness, reduced to a change of mind, when it is in fact the result of strong pressure on individuals, groups and society, in essence, the outcome of a power struggle. It was clearly defined by Takeuchi Yoshimi in 1959: “Conversion may resemble *tenkō* on the outside, but its direction is the reverse. If *tenkō* is a movement toward the outside, conversion is a movement toward the inside. Conversion takes place by preserving the self, whereas *tenkō* occurs by abandoning the self<sup>9</sup>” (cited in Calichman 2005: 75). When societies are losing their established subjective frames and become unstable, when individuals feel they are losing their self, *tenkō* is activated.

But this sense of personal loss and collective anxiety were not a spontaneous experience. They were constructed by groups specialized in expressing, shaping and communicating the collective experience. These individuals took as their social duty and cultural responsibility to express and explain to the people what people were supposed to feel as well as what they should do about it. These groups are commonly called *intellectuals* not in the French sense but in the sense of *intelli*, a Japanese abbreviation from the Russian *intelligentsia* (Sartre 1965, Maruyama 1982, Bourdieu 1992, Rieu 1999, 2001). This Japanese *intelligentsia* associated individuals from different social origins and interests who had in common a specialization in *modern* knowledge, the knowledge required for the formation and management of a modern nation. But these *intelli* did not share the same conception of a modern Japan. Because of their diverse social origin, most of them never achieved the positions they expected in the Meiji State apparatus (*appareil d’Etat*, Althusser 1970).

They were the *discontents* of modern Japan<sup>11</sup>, highly frustrated over not being recognized for their competence and resentful of this modern society, which did not offer them the responsibility and position they thought their due. They felt rejected by the Meiji

---

<sup>8</sup> This problem defies the demarcations within the humanities and social sciences between private and public, between psychology, sociology, economics and politics. At their best, Japanese studies constantly step beyond these demarcations.

<sup>9</sup> Calichman (2004) p 75.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Wert uses the expression “Meiji restoration losers” (Wert 2013).

state and marginalised in the new economy and social ordering. Yet, these discontents never identified themselves with the *people*, or with the various entrepreneurs, opportunists and new rich of modern Japan. At the same time, they never formed a unified group; they were and remained *in between* the classes, torn between their social origin, their acquired knowledge, their expectations and the reality of Meiji Japan, waiting for an opportunity and a role to play<sup>12</sup>. Their discontentment made them highly receptive to *tenkō*. They were and remained strongly divided between those who accepted positions in the modern State apparatus, in its new academic institutions and its economy, and those who refused to participate or were marginalized because of their conception of culture, their criticism of the political and economic regime or because of their social origin. But both groups shared the common ideal of national sovereignty embodied in the *tennō* (emperor). For all these reasons, they did not constitute an effective opposition to those in power. But they did not trust them. Without political power, they accumulated resentment and frustration, leading to despair and revenge, expecting their time to come. So the *tenkō* did not concern the goals and ideals of modernization: securing Japan's sovereignty understood as Japan's uniqueness. Modernization was not conceived as an end in itself but as a project for reaching a spiritual goal or transcendental ideal. *Tenkō* operated at a lower level, the level of the *means* to be selected in the pursuit of a larger goal.

The two main groups of discontents were divided between those who on the one hand wished to modernize Japan's state, economy, society, culture, including art and religion, and those on the other hand who, without opposing modernization, wished to reinterpret and preserve what made in their view Japan unique, its conception of human bonds, of culture and spirituality. A large proportion of both groups found refuge in art, literature and poetry, history, philosophy or science. The first group was fascinated by foreign philosophy, new literature, world history and modern science. The other group intended to protect or save Japanese conceptions of literature, poetry, philosophy and spirituality by reinterpreting them, by expressing them with different *means*. Modern science seemed to them a conception of knowledge based on a relationship between humanity and nature foreign to Japanese experience. But foreign technology was reduced to no more than means and machines, instruments and tools, which could be imported as long as they did not thwart the Japanese

---

<sup>12</sup> I am deeply influenced here by Japanese literature, mainly by Natsume Soseki, in particular by *Nowaki* (1908, in French *Rafales d'automne*, 2015) but also *And then* (1909) and his essay "Japanese modern civilisation" (Natsume 1911). See Rieu (2001: 165-190, 2013: 4.4). In *Nowaki*, the main character, Shirai Dôya, expresses the most explicit and violent criticism against the new leading class of entrepreneurs and against those who succumb to their values. Reading this novel is to wonder what Shirai Dôya would have thought in 1942.



spirit and become an end in itself<sup>13</sup>. Some of these intellectuals were cultural celebrities. However socially divided, these two groups had for common interest the hope and even the will to modernize Japan in order to save its distinctive culture. The ambiguous hope to modernize and save at the same time, the will to dedicate their life to achieve this goal, were common to all of them.

These different groups, their different experiences and common beliefs collided at the end of the 1930s. The slogan *overcoming modernity* is the syndrome of this aggregation, which wrapped the whole of Japanese society in a powerful ideology. This was the explicit theme of the “infamous colloquium”, which took place in Tokyo on 23-24 July 1942, just eight months after Pearl Harbour, the US declaration of war and the full immersion of Japan into the second world war, which ended with Japan’s catastrophic self-destruction, Hiroshima, unconditional surrender and military occupation. Even if what happened was not anticipated, the state of mind of the Japanese people in July 1942 when they thought about their individual and collective situation, can be imagined. Similar debates were many at the time, most of them closer to official propaganda (Calichman 2008: xi-xii). The slogan *overcoming modernity* expresses therefore a precise historical moment in the long-term evolution called “modernization”.

Our motive for putting this moment in perspective is to examine if it belongs specifically to Japan’s modern evolution or if it indicates a specific moment within the modernization process of all or most societies, a social and cultural response to modernization processes transforming in depth economies, societies, belief systems and cultures. The syndrome “overcoming modernity” is the memory of a moment, which erupted within Japan’s modernization process. It is also a response to this experience in order to repress this memory or overcome this disruption. What is this experience? It is not a repetition of forgotten souvenirs, a nostalgia for a previous state, but rather a repetition of successive disruptions, which transformed Japan from the mid-nineteenth century: the intrusive foreigners, the civil wars, the restoration of the Emperor, the invention of a Nation-state and its institutions; the economy and the working conditions of society, new mentalities, cultures and cities; the propaganda of the Meiji state, the wars with Korea, China and Russia; the cultural, economic

---

<sup>13</sup> Encapsulated in the slogan *wakon yōsai* (Japanese spirit/foreign techniques) and other oppositions. These oppositions constitute the long-term “symbolic structure of Japan’s modernisation”, (Rieu 2001: 63-71 2013: 65-72).

and social loosening as well as the increased political control of late Taishō era; the long-term economic depression of the late 1910s and the failure of government to find solutions; the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923, the growing social disorder and political violence from the early 1930s onwards; the state of war since the mid-1930s and the increasing political and economic control of society. Individual and collective experience was the violent repetition of disruptions. This memory was a source of intense anxiety. There was nothing to remember, just disruption, disorder and anxiety.

The formation of this syndrome raises another problem: has this moment happened only once, in Japan's evolution? When and under which circumstances can this syndrome occur again? Because of the dramatic context of its occurrence in Japan, it is important to evaluate if its repetition in the modernization of other societies is proof of a similar context or if it can lead to similar consequences. In this case, as in many others, Japan should be considered, according to Kamisatō Tetsuhiro's expression, "the canary of modernity" (2012). If it is the case, then "overcoming modernity" is indeed a syndrome of a singular and dangerous moment in the modernization of all societies. This should be of concern. The only way to answer such a question is to study the colloquium itself in order to understand how the syndrome is constituted, to identify and articulate together its main themes as expressed in this colloquium, then to excavate the memory of this colloquium, the repetition of this experience and its successive interpretations. From this perspective, studying the "infamous colloquium" means far more than academic work. The task belongs to the event itself: for it participates in its own repetition or, hopefully, its non-repetition.

## **2. Converging ideologies**

This sociological convergence does not explain the cultural dynamics of "overcoming modernity", nor how this collective disenchantment and deep-felt anxiety were formulated into a set of arguments formulating a powerful collective experience and its ideological *holding power*. Less than a year after Japan's full immersion in World War II, already at war with its neighbours in East Asia since the 1931 Manchurian incident, a group of intellectuals decided to meet in Tokyo in order to discuss the role of Japan in world history, i.e. the meaning of this total war for Japan as a nation and for the Japanese people, the responsibility of intellectuals toward the war, the nation and the people of Japan. The colloquium was carefully organized, well researched and its findings amply communicated. With few

exceptions, the participants prepared their papers in advance and circulated them among themselves. The colloquium consisted of two days of discussion based on a list of subjects selected from the papers (Calichman 2008: XII). The organizers<sup>16</sup> were members of a respected magazine, the *Bungakkai* (Literary World). They had planned in advance to publish the papers and the debates in their magazine. The theme “overcoming modernity” was therefore systemically explored and debated from different perspectives.

This explains why the colloquium remains today such a disturbing and important event, as well as why the contents of the colloquium can be interpreted as a syndrome of the psychosocial state of a society. While the participants did not invent the slogan, “overcoming modernization,” they did explore its different aspects and constructed the syndrome. Understanding the cultural roots of these intellectuals and their understanding of “overcoming modernization,” assumes importance due to their role in expressing the tacit thought of the Japanese people, their fears of and anxieties about the war, in which all, one way or another, were involved. Indeed, this is the reason why these intellectuals had in the first place decided to participate in a colloquium on this topic; that is, they saw themselves as a substitute for the people and ascribed to themselves a major cultural and political responsibility: to construct an explanation making sense of the war for the people of Japan.

The syndrome of “overcoming modernity” was a collective construction based on the convergence of two interpretive matrices and discursive attractors shaping collective experience, establishing their holding power on Japanese social, cultural and political history in state of *tenkō*. These interpretive frames have a long history, a deep cultural and political weight. They still inhabit present-day discussions. They do not constitute a rigid ideology but an open debate revolving around key ideas about Japan’s present situation, its causes and the consequences to avoid at any cost. This explains why these ideas cut across usual distinctions and political oppositions. Even if rooted in popular culture and the media, it is inappropriate to view these interpretive frames as implicit, non conscious, because they were explicitly formulated, conceptualized and debated by two institutionalized schools of thought, the Kyoto school and the Japanese romantic school. Based on Japanese studies, my goal is to define these two interpretive matrices, as manifest in the early 1940s and as still active today.

Three members of the famous Kyoto school, Nishitani Keiji, Suzuki Shigetaka and Shimomura Torataro expressed the first interpretive frame. They had in common their role as

---

<sup>16</sup> Kamei, Kawakani, Kobayashi, Nakamura, Miyoshi, Hayashi.

university professors and a shared ambition of creating the first genuinely Japanese school of modern philosophy. Two were specialists in German romantic philosophy. They identified philosophy with the formulation and interpretation of the core values of a nation, the template of its culture, institutions and historical evolution. These core values were considered the “spirit” of the nation, its distinctive trans-historical and transcendental identity. These Japanese philosophers intended to express in this German philosophical matrix the distinctive values and cultural heritage of the Japanese nation. These they found in Zen Buddhism as they considered Christianity the distinctive source of all Western societies. This is what China’s leadership is doing with *New Confucianism*.

Zen Buddhism is quite different from its usual Western conception. Buddhism arrived in Japan in the twelfth century but was thoroughly reinvented in the late nineteenth century. In a seminal article (1993), Robert Sharf explained how the Buddhist communities tried to reinvent themselves after having been censured and persecuted by Meiji reformers as “a corrupt, decadent, antisocial, parasitic, and superstitious creed, inimical to Japan's need for scientific and technological advancement”<sup>17</sup>. Some of the Buddhist leaders who had been trained in universities sought to *restore* their religion and reform it thoroughly in line with the new modern standards found in German philosophy, in the tradition of Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Dilthey and later Heidegger. In this way, “New Buddhism” was intended to be a rediscovery and a return to *true* Buddhism, purified of old superstitions and thoroughly compatible with modern science and technology. To prove compatible with modern Japan, in response also to Shintoism transformed into official state religion, these leaders integrated the values and goals of the Meiji government, in particular the conception of the *kokutai* (national polity, Nishida 1944) ideology establishing the transcendental (trans-historical) homogeneity and spirituality of Japanese nation under its emperor<sup>18</sup>. This modern Buddhism strongly contributed to the Meiji government’s effort to establish Japan as a world power: Buddhism was becoming a world religion spreading Japan’s spiritual values<sup>19</sup>. It quickly played a major role in the diffusion and legitimation of Japanese nationalism in its most extreme forms by integrating a key element from the Confucian tradition, namely, “one’s

---

<sup>17</sup> My comments draw also on Shields (2011), mainly chapter 1: “Buddhism, criticism and post-war Japan”.

<sup>18</sup> The *kokutai* is a pre-modern conception of Japan’s sovereignty elaborated during the Edo period. According to this mystical ground of the Japanese nation, all subjects are unified as one body in a global biophysical and spiritual entity incarnated by the emperor. Various intellectuals associated to the Kyoto school further elaborated the *kokutai* ideology in the late 1930s.

<sup>19</sup> The main objective of Robert Sharf’s article is to explain how this propaganda created the conception of Zen still prevalent today around the world.

master cannot be criticized” (Victoria 2014)<sup>20</sup>. New Buddhism thus added a totalitarian component absent in Meiji authoritarianism. This religion was reconstructed according to a political model and agenda: it became part of the State apparatus and later of the war strategy. Certainly, other Buddhist movements were reformed or founded in Japan’s modern and contemporary history,<sup>21</sup> but none played such a radical role as Zen Buddhism.

In summary, Buddhist reformers did to their religion what Meiji reformers did to the Japanese State, economy and society, that is, replicated the project and its ideology. But the second generation of the *reborn* Zen Buddhists from the Kyoto School were fully trained and highly competent university professors. Their goal was to create a distinctive national philosophy expressing and teaching Japan’s spiritual values. Traditional Zen Buddhism was not a philosophy: it was based on spiritual exercises in search of *enlightenment* withdrawn from society and considered a direct understanding of the Buddha. In modern Japan, spiritual practice had become a reflexive philosophical discourse to access *being*, i.e. a purely Japanese experience of *being* (*Japanese*), the “spirit” of all things Japanese, purified from foreign influence. This conception of philosophy went beyond the distinction between philosophy, in the Socratic and modern sense<sup>22</sup>, and wisdom or religion<sup>23</sup>. Heidegger was considered to be the most influential living German philosopher because he explained the need for our industrial societies to return to a primary experience purified from historical interpretations. At the same time, his work pointed the way to rediscover this ancient quest and achieve this experience. Zen Buddhism was considered an alternative, properly Japanese, to access the experience of truth and being and also an alternative to Christianity: the experience of Zen Buddhist “nothingness” was supposed to be more radical, authentic and spiritual than the Christian God with its complicated structure (revelation, trinity, etc.) and theology (Tanabe 1947, Heisig 2002).

This interpretation of Buddhism at the same time functioned as a criticism of all foreign metaphysics, which distracted the Japanese people and culture from a true Japanese experience of being. But first of all such interpretation was a *political* experience and theory.

---

<sup>20</sup> These two articles explain how the influence of Zen Buddhism spread in Europe and the USA.

<sup>21</sup> It is still part of Japanese contemporary political life. For instance, the *New Komeito* founded in 1998, is playing a key role in establishing political majorities. After having been associated with The Democratic Party of Japan, it has shared power since the December 2012 election as the junior partner in the coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party. This party is an historical outgrowth of a powerful and highly controversial Buddhist sect founded in 1930, the *Soka Gakkai*. It is a case of a religious movement, which has become a (normal) political party.

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche had a strong influence on this group, mainly through Heidegger’s interpretation of his work.

<sup>23</sup> This is the reason why it is considered *post-modern* by some Japanese intellectuals or philosophers. *Ethics* is supposed to overcome the modern divide between philosophy and religion. It is also frequent in the West, mainly in neo-conservative movements.

A philosophical matrix always contains within it a full memory of problems to be raised and solutions to be found. Concerning this conception of a spiritual truth, German romantic philosophy underscored how the transcendental experience of being was always expressed not only within a religion or a society but also within an historical community and political entity. This experience of *being* is the spirit of a nation, a civilization, a religion or humanity itself. The Zen experience of *being* was the experience of the spirit of the Japanese nation embodied in the *tennō*, the emperor. Nishida Kitaro not only explained this philosophy but also turned it into an extreme nationalist ideology (Nishida 1943, 1944, Dilworth D. and Viglielmo V. 1998, Lavelle 1994). One of his disciples, Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), explained after the war that this experience of *being* found its final meaning in a conception of a personal and collective ethics, an attitude toward humanity, nature and the world.

In 1944, in one of his last writings, “*Kokutai*” (On the national polity), Nishida Kitaro himself underwent a remarkable *tenkō*: announcing a probable defeat in the war, he explained that a philosophical mistake had been made. After having condemned racist (German) nationalism, he then condemned ethnic (Japanese) nationalism. The error was the project to liberate Asia by military force and, because of this mistake, Japan had become an imperialist nation like the others. In essence, Japan had committed two fatal errors: on one hand, it betrayed its imagined spiritual mission and on the other it misunderstood the true sense of world history. To secure its survival, it imitated the behaviour as its enemies instead of *cultivating* its historical identity. This was supposed to explain why Japan found itself in a battle it could not win.

Yet, this does not mean Nishida was renouncing ultra-nationalism. On the contrary, ultra-nationalism was not radical enough, not *spiritual* enough: war should be overcome to achieve *peace* as truly spiritual. Worse even, war and defeat were considered a purifying experience to free Japan from all militaristic and imperialist temptations, which proved a betrayal of Japan’s true spirit and historical meaning. So post-war Japan was officially anti-militarist, humanistic and pacifist. These are not left-wing ideas, but were rather viewed as representing a common ideal beyond the Left-Right divide. Japan’s pacifism is a version of its trans-historical uniqueness (Almog 2014). In other words, pacifism is the pursuit of war by spiritual means.

The second interpretive frame and conceptual attractor was the *Japanese romantic school*. Its two participants at the colloquium, Kamei Katsuichiro and Hayashi Fusao, were not “philosophers” belonging to academic institutions but rather, like the organizers, writers,

poets, journalists, essayists and literary critics in the modern media. They can be considered progressive, the *Left*. They shared a different relationship to Japan's cultural memory, social positioning and political agenda. They were influential intellectuals who had belonged to the *Movement for a proletarian literature*. "Proletarian literature" had less to do with a Marxist conception of the proletariat than with modern literature and the description of the *people* in their daily life in essays, short stories and novels. This conception of modern literature was imported from Europe and Russia: in essence, it meant Baudelaire, Dickens, Zola and Dostoevsky, the streets and underworld of London, Paris or Saint Petersburg. This literature was *modern* because it offered new narrative models making a place for the daily and inner life of ordinary people, their search for explanations and values in order to make sense of their lives in a society which had transformed the way people worked and behaved toward each other, the relations within the family, between men, women and children, their feelings, ideals and desires, including their political regime. Literature was connecting individual and collective memories. In a sense, the people had invaded literature, all classes together and the real people as a new nation, shouldering the problems of misery, oppression and frustration. This invasion had a strong political meaning. Modern literature and Marxism had given shape to this new collective experience, the first one was expressing distress without hope and the second one was explaining this distress and providing hope: the unity of a people overcoming and transcending a modern and foreign model of society.

Around 1910, after the Kotoku Sushui incident<sup>26</sup>, Marxism was considered a dangerous foreign doctrine and was soon forbidden. The intellectuals concerned by *The movement for a proletarian literature* slowly converted to the romantic school and its German conception of a cultural and historical community. These intellectuals had in common with the followers of the Kyoto school a certainty: what turns a community into a nation is deeper than institutions, no matter traditional or modern. Their *tenkō* was ambiguous: it meant both a rejection of Western imperialism and the emancipation of the Japanese people, both a search for a principle to resist foreign oppression and for a principle to unite the people. Emancipation ideals and nationalism remain until today in a state of profound confusion. Political consciousness and literary interests were merging in the new media of the time and this ambiguous relationship was shaping their public.

---

<sup>26</sup> The "Kotoku Sushui incident" is an aborted anarchist attempt against the Emperor Meiji, which gave the police the opportunity to arrest various anarchists and socialists and hang some of them without real trial. It sent a strong message throughout Japanese society: the time of repression had started. Kotoku Sushui was a writer and journalist, pacifist and internationalist, socialist and anarchist.

A participant in the colloquium, Moroi Saburo, a musician and musicologist trained in Germany, formulated the meaning of romanticism at this moment of Japanese culture. It was a literary conversion, a redemption and solution to all modern problems: “For romanticism, the highest art expresses the moment when the whole is known by the individual, whereupon individuality bursts into flames and sets up sparks” (Calichman 2008:165). Flames and sparks are the signs of the spirit, with dreadful overtones. This romantic conversion was a type of *tenkō*. Romanticism is the overcoming of individual subjectivity and access to the whole, to the community as a whole. The nation was sacred and in the case of Japan this sacred principle of unity was, as old as Japan, the *tennō*. But the core and principle of this community was the living emperor, the embodied spirit of a Japanese identity adverse to capitalism. Communism and nationalism, anti-capitalism and anti-modernization were mixed up in a sort of emancipatory nationalism.

The organizers included also individuals typical of modernized Japan: a catholic theologian, disciple of Jacques Maritain; a scientist specialized in contemporary physics; a film critic and the music composer, Moroi Saburo (Calichman 2008: 164-176).<sup>28</sup> They were highly specialized individuals associated in a project beyond their real field of expertise. Even if each of them had enjoyed real experience and a deep understanding of European history, their contribution to this colloquium and its broad subject induced them to reproduce the same concepts (“essence”, “spirit”, “identity”, “unity”) as the two conceptual matrices.

### 3. “Overcoming modernity”: meta-ideology as metaphysics

What is “infamous” about this colloquium is the convergence of these two discursive frames. This convergence was performed and reinforced by respected intellectuals giving themselves for goal to reinterpret the past and to construct a collective memory within individual subjectivities. This convergence was achieved by a dramatic *tenkō* into the common matrix of Japanese ultra-nationalism. Of course, this convergence did not invent Japan’s ultra-nationalism: its doctrine and conditions were already in place. The proceedings of the colloquium were not so widely read that they intensified ultra-nationalistic hold on the population. Probably, many Japanese, perhaps most of them, never accepted the most extreme aspects of this form of fascism. The point is rather that “overcoming modernity” gave a

---

<sup>28</sup> His contribution, “From our standpoint. Reflexions on overcoming modernity”, is of particular interest for its clarity, his real knowledge of European cultural history and his views on the state of Japan.



slogan and content to a syndrome. It exhibited a process aggregating individual subjectivities and collective attitudes, anchoring them firmly in a discourse as well as a vision of the Japanese nation and the role of each Japanese in the present situation. Certainly, people were more than ready to assimilate these ideas and thought processes, which heretofore had not yet been formulated in such a synthetic, explicit and well-argued manner. The reputation and quality of the participants in the colloquium reinforced the absorption of these ideas and their retention by the masses. An analysis of this colloquium can therefore be viewed as an analysis of Japanese individual and collective subjectivities at this historical conjuncture.

By repeated *tenkō*, the search for spiritual truth and the search for political and economic emancipation merged into a new discourse: collective emancipation was found in the cult of the emperor by means of total war in order to protect the Japanese people from the evils of modern society and foreign imperialism, with the goal of saving Japan's unique trans-historical identity. What is infamous in this colloquium is that this ideological, even philosophical, convergence operated in such a way as to *eliminate* any alternative discourses.

Many Japanese intellectuals never accepted this discursive domination. Their voices were silenced and their conceptual references marginalized and repressed. Being dispossessed of an alternative narrative and memory, they were reduced to reproducing this self-same *tenkō* or withdrawing from intellectual life (Cassegard 2008), that is, they had to keep silent and obey. They had no *voice*, because they did not possess a conceptual frame to voice alternative ideas. Infamous was the power of this fake metaphysics and oppressive meta-ideology. To question it was akin to a taboo because it would mean questioning the role of the emperor, Japan's cultural identity as well as the power structure hidden behind this ideology. People were unable to oppose extreme politics, which was denying any sense of humanity in the name of a transcendental mission. To be deprived of a discourse to express one's opposition is one of the worst kinds of totalitarianism. To voice opposition in this situation would be holding the discourse of the enemy, being dismissed and even annihilated. It was thus a silent subjective repression, a conceptual cage and a tunnel toward total disaster. This unreal situation explains why, immediately after the war, Japanese people seemed to foreign observers to wake up from a nightmare and just restart their lives in their devastated cities (Dower 1999: 97-110). They were invaded by their enemy and felt liberated at the same time.

The problem is: what were these intellectuals really doing during this 1942 "overcoming modernity" colloquium? To start with, they collected the broken pieces of Japan's modern history and reconnected them in a new collective memory in accordance with

their pseudo-unity and the role these intellectuals thought they were entitled to play against the backdrop of frustration during Japan's initial modernization. More precisely, they were managing memory in order to better control the people. Reading the proceedings makes one thing perfectly clear: no real debate took place. They had different but not opposing opinions. These opinions were strengthening and justifying each other's stance. The colloquium was a collective construction of a diagnosis of Japan's historical situation, the tentative construction of an intellectual consensus on the meaning of the war, of a national pact in order to build trust and support for the government's war policy. These intellectuals positioned themselves as the prime movers of the nation's unity, their converging opinions serving to fuse together the *spirit* of Japan and the will of the Japanese people. *Tenkō* was their method but their goal was to stop endless *tenkō* by enunciating a truth. They were fabricating a fake memory with the goal of excluding any real debate and any real knowledge of Japan's modernization and present situation. The colloquium was in fact no more than a discussion driven by a political agenda based on reciprocal interests. Their interpretation of Japan's situation could in no way act as a substitute for the effective experience and memory of the Japanese people, for the ideals, achievements and failures of Meiji, for the economic and social crisis of the 1920s, for the repressions, exploitations and the wars, including this last one Japan could not win.

These intellectuals were working together to fabricate metaphysics by assembling a set of "language games", pieces of memory and arguments, cohered into a scenario, a *montage* of past events and an interpretation of the present. Their efforts were in negotiating the construction of a metaphysical scenario, which had as its goal repression in a Freudian sense: that is, to conceal from the Japanese people the effective reasons for their present situation. This meta-ideology covers up its construction: it was an obstacle to knowledge, a fake memory and a false history of Japan's modernization. The metaphysics of "overcoming modernity" deserves all our attention because it points at a specific moment in the evolution of a society. This moment of deep crisis, touching all aspects of society, is simultaneously a moment when the reasons for the crisis are suppressed, the investigation hindered and a metaphysical substitute invented. A history of Japan's evolution is made impossible, reduced to a narrative acting as common memory. What is perverse in the case of Japan is that this metaphysics planted this false collective memory inside individual subjectivities. No society seems to be immune to this situation<sup>29</sup>. The construction of this metaphysics needs to be

---

<sup>29</sup> The case of France in the 1930s is both similar and simultaneous: French fascism intended to overcome the opposition between left and right by invoking the "spirit" of the French nation, its unique history and culture. This spirit is a call for morality and ethics against the "modern world" (Sternhell 2012: 789, 295-317, 382-407).

studied in order to understand the historical and contemporary power of this interpretive frame, a source of many different ideologies and philosophies. Its apparent depth needs to be examined in order to prove its banality: it is an endless story, a myth and its endless variations<sup>30</sup>. Some extended variations might sound deep and full of sense. This explains why “overcoming modernity” is still everywhere in our discourses and daily experience. What is “infamous” in this metaphysics-as-collective memory is that it pretends to be a philosophy when the meaning and role of philosophy are, on the contrary, to criticize such metaphysical or ideological constructions because they produce ignorance instead of knowledge.

Exposing the mode of construction and role of this fallacy is necessary. Reading the proceedings reveals how these intellectuals were not discussing directly Japan itself and its history. The discussions were constantly mediated by European long-term and contemporary history. Japan was debated in the mirror of an interpretation of Europe’s modern evolution. What the audience and the readers were supposed to see was not the mirror held up to them but an image of Japan in the mirror of European modernity, of an interpretation of modernity in Europe. The colloquium built up Europe as a substitute for Japan. The cover-up sent a tacit message to the readers: “Consider what is happening in Europe, understand how Europe ended up in its present situation and you will understand the direction Japan is heading if you do not undertake everything possible to overcome foreign modernity by supporting the Japanese government”. It is nothing more than propaganda under the guise of metaphysics.

Debating about Europe enabled the participants to avoid and repress any real debate about Japan’s situation. The false mirror of Europe had the goal of injecting into the minds of the people one simple idea: if the people fail to support the government’s war policy, they will repeat Europe’s evolution and descend into spiritual, cultural and social self-destruction. Europe is built up as a false mirror of Japan’s modern past, present and future, as a model to fear and reject in order to tacitly edify and justify a pure Japanese model. This discursive dispositive dissimulates the real situation of Japan and the effective condition of the Japanese people. This is commonly done today when the “West” or “modernity” are criticized by China, Russia or is rejected around the world on ethnic or religious grounds. The dispositive is always the same: Europe was constructed as a distorted vision of a true Japan but the construction of this distortion was covering up the truth of Japan. This perverse dispositive

---

Beyond historical fascism, this syndrome is still pervasive and influential in France. Advanced industrial societies find themselves in a similar situation since 2007. The fact that the circumstances, the causes and consequences are obviously different, dissimulate the similarities. Investigations are not suppressed but are not heard and taken into account.

<sup>30</sup> One of these variations is found in Heidegger post-war essay “The question concerning technology” (1953).

shows both the status of these intellectuals and the role they intended to play at this historical context. The same dispositive offered them after the defeat the possibility of an easy *tenkô*. They just had to reverse the mirror: Europe could become again the model to reproduce and *former* Japan the model to reject. It was just a question of *memory management*.

#### 4. “Overcoming modernity”: the script

Despite their historical roots in 1940’s Japan, exposing the basic script produced through these texts and discussions is necessary and even urgent. As explained before, this metaphysics is a composite narrative made of fragments of memories, histories and experiences, philosophies and ideologies, beliefs from Japan and Europe. The script, i.e. the argumentative structure of many different narratives needs to be analysed with some precision. First, the narrative of “overcoming modernization” acts as a collective memory inside individual subjectivities. It formulates what people are supposed to feel and understand about their nation and their personal responsibility toward the nation. Secondly, it provides fake explanations of the causes and potential consequences of their situation. It pretends to be a cure for their anxiety but the goal is on the contrary to intensify anxiety. Thirdly, people are supposed to assimilate this metaphysics as their own memory and as the common experience of the people of Japan. This memory is simply the subjective internalization of a metaphysical discourse, the production of a trans-individual *unconscious* acting as a collective belief. In other words, to formulate the script of this discourse opens the possibility to analyse the structure of this experience and memory.

The core of the script is a thesis about modernity, source of endless variations in academic research and mass media everywhere in this world. Just look around and you will find many different variations. According to this script, the origin of modernity is a catastrophe: a divide within society and between societies (Calichman 2008)<sup>31</sup>. This divide is supposed to have erupted for the first time in world history in Western Europe: it is considered as the *essence* or origin of modern Europe and the *West*, a historical scandal and the source of all modern (contemporary) problems<sup>32</sup>. The consequence of this eruption is a

---

<sup>31</sup> These arguments are mainly developed during the colloquium by Kamei Katsuichiro (1907-1966), Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko (1904-1945). The year of their death shows that some of them were influential until recently.

<sup>32</sup> This scenario is particularly virulent these days in radical Islam but also in religious fundamentalisms and many regressive popular philosophies.

divide between two types of civilization, which have nothing in common. A first type of civilization is centred around religion, around a transcendental faith or metaphysical principle establishing and guaranteeing (by force if necessary) unity, harmony and coherence between the different components of society: harmony between humanity and nature, between humans, between cultures and nations. A second type of civilization is modern, European, Western or Westernized. In contrast to the first one, it has lost its transcendental principle of unity, harmony and coherence. It is supposed to drift without god and religion: nothing exists anymore beyond humans and humanity to block and control, regulate and tame conflicts. Men and women are responsible and in charge of everything: because of their limited knowledge, they repeatedly fail. Morality has disappeared and humans are caught in endless conflicts and wars due to selfishness, jealousy and competition. There are no limits to human will and no sacred norms to follow and respect: everything is temporary and relative, discussed and negotiated, debated and contested. A society, which has lost its God, is supposed to fall into the modern spirit of capitalism and democracy.

Thousands of intellectuals and philosophers around the world have repeated and still explore this script. This modern divide revolves around the “Copernican revolution” and the invention of “modern science”<sup>33</sup>. The very existence of this modern divide is a cultural and religious taboo: how was it even possible? The divide is both a fact and impossible at the same time. So there must be a hidden continuity between a Middle Age and a Modern age, between a world closed around a transcendent being and a world centred around Man, open and in constant transformation, in which individuals and groups debate and organize their world according to their own principles, interests and values. More profoundly, if such a modern world is possible and even successful, it must be because the former transcendental world made it possible and even led to its formation and growth<sup>34</sup>. There must be an “invisible hand”, not just a “spontaneous emerging order”. The transcendental ground is just ignored and denied but will prevail in the end. For the intellectuals debating in 1942 about “Overcoming modernity”, Japan’s culture was supposed to be the living proof of its trans-historical existence.

If in Europe, the modern divide concerns the conception of the Christian God and the role of religion, in the case of Japan, it concerned the meaning and role of the emperor, a conception of society as a community organized by a divine principle effectively present

---

<sup>33</sup> The historical meaning of the Copernican revolution was debated in remarkable contributions by Shimomura Toratarô (1902-1995), a historian of modern science, and Tsumura Hideo (1907-1985), a film critic.

<sup>34</sup> The continuity between the ancient world, the Middle Age and the modern age is still a debate in the French contemporary philosophy concerned by Christianity and other religious presuppositions.

within this world, amongst its subjects. It concerned also the restoration of the emperor as condition, source and spiritual guide of the modernization of the nation. The *tennō* was living proof that modernity is not a divide: another modernity is possible, which does not separate a modern society from its sacred and ancient roots. More generally, the historical disorders, crises and wars of Europe and the West are supposed to bring proof that modernity puts humanity at risk and leads to its self-destruction. Of course the taboo facing these intellectuals, these *modernizers*, is that Japan was at war at the time of the colloquium. It was urgent in 1942 to justify and find an explanation for the war in which the Japanese nation, its emperor and its people were engulfed. *Modernizers* took it as their personal responsibility to explain that Japanese modernity was not the “big divide” but on the contrary a restoration, a return to Japan’s origin in order to ground continuity between the sacred and the modern world. These intellectuals were operating in this colloquium their own *tenkō* by explaining the need to “overcome modernity”, to deny the modern divide, to suppress the dividing seeds of modernization. They also intended, explicitly or not, to overcome the divide between the modernizers in power, who were governing society and managing the war and the literary modernizers, who were debating in the name of the Japanese people in order to infamously operate a further *tenkō* and bring proof of their ideological support to the war. “Overcoming” is not Hegelian *Aufhebung* but Freudian suppression.

Beyond the articles and discussions at the colloquium, the message is clear: Japan was forced to go to war in order to prevent the modern divide from further damaging the Japanese nation, to sew up the nation around its emperor, to fight and resist the enemy, i.e. all those modernized and profane nations, which have for their only principle the modern divide, i.e. the absence of principle. The tacit strategy shared by all participants was to suppress Japan’s real history and memory of the Japanese people: the final failure of the Edo period, the conditions of the Meiji restoration, the construction of a modern state and economy, the debate about the Rights of the people, the economic exploitation of the masses (especially women), the construction of a modern army and conflicts with neighbouring countries, the political repression, the financial and economic crisis of the 1920s, the attempted military coups, the war in China and now the Pacific war. The goal of the “overcoming modernity” metaphysics was to neutralize history and suspend historical knowledge, the right of individuals to access their common history. This suppression was substituting European modern history for Japan’s modernization and was reducing Europe to its multiple revolutions, crises and wars, including the self-destruction of European modern ideals in World War I. This suppression and substitution were operated through the mutual

construction of a metaphysical explanation: the end of the medieval supposedly sacred world and the emergence of a secular world based on jealousy, greed, competition, an unbound will to control nature and humanity. Individual rights, civil freedom and democracy, economic growth, scientific knowledge, including the transition from religion to faith, the very content of secular European civilization were suppressed exactly as Japanese historical memory was suppressed. The Japanese were trapped in a metaphysical cage and total war.

## **5. Conclusion. From inter-subjective memory to history as human science**

When did it stop? Or, did it stop at all? These are challenging questions not only for understanding present-day Japan but also for understanding all these societies caught in variations of the syndrome of overcoming modernity. Is it possible to free Japan, Russia or China, even France and the USA, among many others, from the suspicion of recurring hard or soft ultra-nationalism? In the case of Japan, the period oscillating between repeated modernizations and the desire to overcome modernity is now closed. Japan *is* post-modern: “after the modern” is also beyond “overcoming modernity”. That is, a Japanese version of modernity is firmly in place. This does not prevent Japan, like any other nation, from having fits of patriotism, chauvinism, populism and nationalism. The trauma of the war is so deep and devastating that part of it is both acknowledged and denied at the same time, taboo<sup>35</sup>. We are all aware of the right-wing black sound trucks in front of train stations and their rhetoric. But the ideological construction at the source of ultra-nationalism, as analysed above, has vanished. The individual and collective memory of the contemporary Japanese is precisely the disappearance of this ideology. Even visits by Prime ministers to the Yazukuni shrine look like staged events for TV cameras, an embarrassing political folklore, more than the revival of ultra-nationalism. History as human science cannot be overcome anymore by individual and collective phantasms. On the contrary, human and social sciences act in Japan like in Europe as the twin supports of memory. Japanese society is facing today other problems.

But the fight was intense and never ends. In 1949, a famous participant in the 1942 colloquium, Nishitani Keiji, gave a course on nihilism at Kyoto University. The translators (Parkes & Aihara 1990) of the resulting book found the perfect title to condense its contents,

---

<sup>35</sup> Japanese politics and medias remain infested by debates on history manuals, chapters on comfort women, war crimes, medical experiments on populations, mass murders, which no Japanese can deny but which deeply question Japan’s historical identity. Facing their war crimes and to overcome this tragic moment of their history, the Germans could refer to Humanism, the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Because the Japanese cannot find anymore in their history a similar solution, they found article 9 of the 1947 Constitution and the ideals of post-war democracy. Japan is still at work with itself.

*The self-overcoming of nihilism*<sup>36</sup>. The goal of the course was to restart and rewrite the 1942 Tokyo colloquium on “overcoming modernity”. Nishitani did not intend to correct or justify what he wrote in 1942 but to express in 1949 the meaning of his thought. The defeat, the destructions and the dead, the invasion and occupation by the enemy are explained like Nishida Kitaro had foreseen in 1944: they correct deep philosophical mistakes. The cause is European thought and the importation of the virus of modernity all through Japan’s modernization. The virus is nihilism. The question in 1949 is: should the Japanese renounce “overcoming modernity”? Has it become impossible? But if it is impossible, what is the meaning of this despairing nihilism? Nishitani’s answer was to accept and deepen nihilism, not to deny or reject it. The experience of nihilism is considered the only way to rediscover and restore the *spirit*, the trans-historical essence of Japan, to further purify this *spirit* and deepen the unique Japanese experience of being. He intended to prove the superiority of the Japanese spirit by a distinction between nihilism and *nihilicity*. Nihilism is the effect on European civilization of the despairing experience of God being dead and a life without meaning. *Nihilicity* is the experience that God never existed: the idea of God dissimulates the reality of life. So what was, concretely, Nishitani’s answer? Simple: that the Japanese should not fear Americanization and Westernization in general as it is meaningless to oppose nihilism. The solution is thus to accept it and even want it in order to push it to its limit. Americanism is a type of civilization, which is a non-civilization, the death and negation of any *spirit*, the triumph of entertainment, greed and violence. But there will be a moment when nihilism will become an end in itself and prove a dead-end. This moment is supposed to be the experience of what *nihilicity* means. Endless consumption and entertainment, the two principles of Americanism, lead to *nihilicity*. Seeing shopping in Japan and the rest of East Asia, the road to *nihilicity* seems a long one without end. Clearly, Nishitani did not learn much from the war.

During the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s, the Humanities and social sciences took a final hold on collective memory. Another generation of intellectuals who set out to write the history of modern Japan sought to concentrate first on the 1930s and 1940s. Takeuchi Yoshimi wrote a major article on the “Overcoming modernity” colloquium<sup>37</sup>, Tsurumi Shunsuke edited from 1959 to 1962 a three volumes series *Recantation: a*

---

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Rieu 2001, 2013: chapter 5.

<sup>37</sup> “Overcoming modernity” in Calichman (2004), chapter 5. My comments are derived from the colloquium itself.



*collaborative research project* (revised edition in 1978. See Olson 1992: 133-135) focusing on the *tenkō* process, from the invasion of Manchuria until the American occupation. Maruyama Masao undertook archaeology<sup>39</sup> of democracy in Japan. What is remarkable is the explicit goal of replacing pre-war and war memories by historical and sociological research, to replace ignorance by knowledge, to publish the results of a thorough inquiry with the goal of establishing an inquiry as the basis of public debate. Yoshimoto Takaaki (1964) is another author, who constantly studied ultra-nationalist ideology and the reasons why Japanese culture and institutions gave rise and fell prey to this ideology.

A growing distance was established between the Japan of the first half of the twentieth century and the Japanese economy and society rebuilt since 1945. When in the early 1980s, the Japanese economy was the most productive and innovative in the world, the pride of the Japanese, the *nihonjinron* movement, appeared as a sort of secularized and popular nationalism, a sort of excessive patriotism, which was never a real danger for democracy. The period when Japan was “the best” and “unique” was short-lived: in 1985, the first *endaka* (rise of the yen) started the deconstruction of the Japanese economy and it opened the gate of the systemic crisis, which started in the early 1990s and has since deeply transformed Japan.

In this context, the volume *Postmodernism and Japan* (1989) edited by Harry Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi played an important role in establishing a connection between the project to “overcome modernity” and the post-modern movement. The 1942 colloquium was indeed studied in the book but the connection between the two was proved misleading. The book taught the world what post-modernism meant in Japan, touching all the problems raised by modernity in Japan and also elsewhere. Japanese studies were not any more confined to the study of Japan but were considered as a major field of study in human and social sciences (at least for this author). If asked to give a date when the spell of the “overcoming modernity” ideology vanished, I would venture 1996 and a colloquium *The modern after the postmodern* organized by Henri Meschonnic and Hasumi Shiguehiko at Tokyo University (2002). The idea that after postmodernism, a new conception of the modern and a new modernity were starting or could be imagined, proved that the memory of the 1942 colloquium and the phantasm of “overcoming modernity” belonged in Japan to the past. The challenge is enormous.

But the “overcoming modernity” phantasm is alive and well in many parts of the world. Hopefully the case of Japan can help identify this syndrome and teach how to cure this

---

<sup>39</sup> In the sense of Michel Foucault: an analysis of the historical conditions of democratic culture and institutions.

dangerous social disease. Memory is endlessly contested and contestable because it has no ground, just inter-subjective agreements, which are expressing the power of a group or a nation on others. The case of Japan makes clear what history as a human science means in the evolution of societies toward modernity. Endless research, debates and controversies are its strength: they produce new knowledge. As a discipline, history is an essential part of public debate and democracy: it criticizes and regulates collective memory and its impact on individual subjectivities and behaviours. Interferences between history and memory are a constant tension. To contest the freedom of historians or to reduce the role of history and human sciences in public debates is to increase the risk of repeating endless memory conflicts and even regressing to immemorial wars. Finally this study intends to bring proof that in order to play their critical role in a democratic society, human sciences need to integrate a trans-cultural and trans-disciplinary perspective.

## References

- Allioux, Y-M. (ed.), 1996. *Cent ans de pensée au Japon*, Arles, Picquier, 2 volumes. Introduction by Rieu, A-M.
- Almog, G., 2014. "The myth of the 'pacifist' Japanese constitution", *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, vol. 12, issue 36, n°2, September 8.
- Althusser, L., 1970. "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État. (Notes pour une recherche)", Paris: review *La Pensée*, n° 151, reprinted in *Positions* (1964-1975), Paris: Les Éditions sociales, 1976: 67-125.
- Barshay, A., 2007. *The social sciences in modern Japan. The Marxian and modernist traditions*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bourdieu, P., 1992. *Les règles de l'art*, Paris, Seuil. 1996. translation, *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Calichman, R., (ed. and translation), 2005. *What is modernity ? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*, New York: Columbia University Press, chapter 5. 2008. *Overcoming modernity. Cultural identity in wartime Japan*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cassegard, C., 2008. "From withdrawal to resistance. The rhetoric of exit in Yoshimoto Takaaki and Karatani Kojin", *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, March 4th.
- Doak, K., 1994. *Dreams of difference: the Japanese Romantic School and the crisis of modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press. 2007. *A history of nationalism in modern Japan*, Leiden: Brill.
- Dilworth D. and Viglielmo V., 2008. *Sourcebook for modern Japanese philosophy. Selected documents*, Westport and London: Greenwood Press.

- Dower, J., 1999. *Embracing defeat. Japan in the wake of world war II*, New York: Norton.
- Friedrich, O, 1972. *Before the deluge. A portrait of Berlin in the 1920s*, New York : Harper and Row
- Halbwachs, M., 1992. *On collective memory (1952)*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Harootunian, H. and Miyoshi M., 1989. *Postmodernism and Japan*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Harootunian, H., 2000. *Overcome by modernity. History, culture and community in interwar Japan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Heisig, J., 2002. *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*, Honolulu: Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture, University of Hawaii Press.
- Kamisato, T. & Kayano T., 2012. *Botsuraku suru bunmei (The Collapse of Civilizations)*, Tokyo: Shueisha.
- Kato, T., 2010. “Le marxisme et l'héritage du mouvement socialiste japonais sur la question de la modernisation”, Tokyo: *Ebisu*, n° 44, *La modernisation du Japon revisitée*, Fall 2010: 111-136.
- Lavelle, P., 1994. “The political thought of Nishida Kitaro”, Tokyo: *Monumenta Nipponica*, Summer 1994: 139-163.
- Koschmann, J.V., 1996. *Revolution and subjectivity in postwar Japan*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Le Goff, J., 1988. *Histoire et mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Maruyama M., 1982. “Les intellectuels dans le Japon moderne”, in Allieux, 1996. Introduction & translation by Joly J., vol. 2: 275-332.
- Meschonnic, H. & Hasumi, S., (ed.), 2002. *La modernité après le post-moderne*, Paris: Ed. Maisonneuve & Larose.
- Natsume S., 1908, translation Suetsugu E., 2015. *Rafales d'automne*, Arles: Philippe Picquier.
- 1911, translation Rubin J., 1992. *Kokoro : a novel and selected essays*, New York: Madison Book.
- Nishida, K., “Fundamental principles of a new world order (1943)”, “On the national polity (1944)” in Dilworth D. and Viglielmo V., 1998.
- Olson, L., 1992. *Ambivalent moderns. Portraits of Japanese cultural identity*, Savage: Rowman and Littlefield.

Parkes G. & Aihara S. (ed. and translation), 1990. *Nishitani Keiji, The self-overcoming of nihilism (1949)*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Reich, W., 1946. *The mass psychology of fascism (1933)*, New York, Orgone Institute.

Rieu, A.M., 1999. "La fin en France du pacte "intellectuel/société", in J-M Guieu (ed.), *Intolérance et indignation : l'affaire Dreyfus aujourd'hui*, Paris: Fischbacher <<http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00867346>>. 2001. *Savoir et pouvoir dans la modernisation du Japon*, Paris: P.U.F., chapter 2. 2013. *Le Japon, un pays inachevé qui ne parvient pas à dépasser la modernité*, translation Kubota R., Tokyo: Suiseisha, chapter 2.

Sartre, J.P., 1965. "Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels" in 1972. *Situations, VIII*, Paris: Gallimard: 375-455.

Sharf, R.H., 1993. "The Zen of Japanese nationalism", *History of Religions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, vol. 33, n° 1: 1-43 (available on line from *thezensite*).

Shields, J.M., 2011. *Critical Buddhism: engaging with modern Japanese modern thought*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

Sternhell, Z., 2012. *Ni droite, ni gauche. L'idéologie fasciste en France*, Paris, Gallimard.

Tanabe, H., 1947. "Christianity, Marxism and Japanese Buddhism in anticipation of a second religious reformation", in Dilworth D. and Viglielmo V., 1998: 115-158.

Tsurumi S., 2013. *An intellectual history of wartime Japan, 1931-1945 (1982)*, London: Routledge.

Victoria, B.D., 2014. "Zen Masters on the Battlefield. Part I", *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, vol. 11, issue 24, n° 3, June. "Zen Masters on the Battlefield. Part II", vol. 11, issue 27, n° 4, July.

Wert, M., 2013. *Meiji restoration losers: memory and Tokugawa supporters in modern Japan*, Cambridge, Harvard University press.

Yoshimoto, T., 1964. "Les fondements intellectuels de l'autonomie" (*Jiritsu no shisôteki kyoten*), translation Suetsugu, E., in Allieux 1996, vol. 2: 186-224.